04/12/24 BIG TECH

UK Plans Facial Recognition Expansion, Empowering Cops to Scan Faces in the Street + More

The Defender's Big Brother NewsWatch brings you the latest headlines related to governments' abuse of power, including attacks on democracy, civil liberties and use of mass surveillance. The views expressed in the excerpts from other news sources do not necessarily reflect the views of The Defender.

By The Defender Staff

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UK Plans Facial Recognition Expansion, Empowering Cops to Scan Faces in the Street

Reclaim the Net reported:

> In the U.K., the government has presented its plans for a large-scale increase of the use of facial recognition technology which the police want to deploy in a number of ways and across a range of locations.
>
> According to Big Brother Watch, taxpayers in that country will foot the bill amounting to a total of £230 million (some $288 million). In return for financing this expansion of what the rights group calls Orwellian tech, citizens will be subjected to even more intense mass surveillance.
>
> A government press release said £55.5 million would be spent on facial recognition tools over the next four years specifically to address the problem of retail crime (also euphemistically referred to as "shoplifting"). That's a good place to "tuck in" that information, given that the public is likely to look favorably at any attempt to tackle the problem.
>
> However, if "shoplifting" is a major reason behind them, the plans look like killing a fly with an elephant gun. There will be a convoy of live facial recognition vans — "mobile units" — in crowded areas of high streets and elsewhere in cities.

What the Evidence Really Says About Social Media's Impact on Teens' Mental Health

Vox reported:

> The kids are not all right — and the device you are probably reading this on is to blame.
>
> So argues the social psychologist Jonathan Haidt. In his new book, The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness, Haidt insists that smartphones and social media are fueling a "surge of suffering" that's inundating teens all across the Western world.
>
> By Haidt's account, smartphones and the addicting social media apps we download onto them have lured the world's youths away from those activities that are indispensable to healthy child development — such as outdoor play, face-to-face conversation with friends, and sleep — and trapped them in a digital realm that saps their self-esteem, drains their attention spans, and forces them to put on a perpetual, high-stakes performance of their own personalities.
>
> Smartphones have even hurt kids who don't use them much, according to Haidt, because they've restructured communal life in harmful ways. Teenagers' rates of anxiety, depression, self-harm, and suicide have all skyrocketed as a result.

House Passes FISA Reauthorization Bill After Previous GOP Setback

ABC News reported:

> The House on Friday voted to reauthorize a key U.S. spy program considered crucial to national security.
>
> In a 273 to 147 vote, lawmakers renewed Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act, which is set to expire on April 19, through 2026. It now heads to the Senate.
>
> Section 702 allows the U.S. government to collect electronic communications of non-Americans located outside the country without a warrant. It came under scrutiny among some lawmakers on both sides of the aisle and civil liberties groups because it sometimes results in the collection of data on Americans who are in contact with those surveilled individuals.
>
> An amendment was offered to add a warrant requirement to see data from Americans, but it narrowly failed in a 212 to 212 vote.

Settlement Reached in Lawsuit Against UT-Battelle Over COVID Vaccine Requirement

WATE 6 reported:

> At least one of the plaintiffs has reached a settlement with UT-Battelle in a lawsuit over how UT-Battelle handled exemptions to its COVID-19 vaccine requirement, according to court documents.
>
> An order filed on Thursday, April 11 states that UT-Battelle, the management contractor for Oak Ridge National Laboratory, reached a settlement with plaintiff Jessica Bilyeu. The stipulations of the settlement are required to be filed by April 18 or the case will be dismissed, according to the order.
>
> A previously filed memorandum states that Bilyeu was an employee of UT-Battelle when the organization announced on August 26, 2021, that all employees would be required to receive the COVID-19 vaccination by October 15 of that year. Allegedly, when requests were made for religious accommodations, UT-Battelle provided the accommodation that those who raised religious objections to the vaccine could go on unpaid leave.
>
> Three days before the scheduled start of the unpaid leave, a lawsuit was filed and the court issued a temporary restraining order to stop UT-Battelle from placing employees on unpaid leave until the court could rule on a motion for a preliminary injunction. The court later denied the plaintiff's motion, reinstating the organization's vaccination policies.

Meta Criticized After Lowering WhatsApp Minimum Age From 16 to 13

Sky News reported:

> Meta has lowered the minimum age to use the popular messaging platform WhatsApp. The move, which came into effect on Thursday, reduces the age limit from 16 down to 13 in the U.K. and EU.
>
> It has been criticized by a number of campaign groups who have urged the company to reverse the decision.
>
> Smartphone Free Childhood told Sky News that it was an example of "a tech giant putting shareholder profits first and children's safety second."
>
> A spokesperson for the group said: "Reducing their age of use from 16 to 13 sends a message to parents that WhatsApp is safe for children, but the stories we're hearing from our community of parents paint a very different picture."

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